

Global Fund director admits to \$8bn shortfall

Alex Vass *BMJ*

The Global Fund, which was set up to fight AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria, needs a huge increase in resources and it needs it quickly, said its executive director, Dr Richard Feacham, speaking to delegates at the 14th international AIDS conference, held in Barcelona last week.

He said the \$1.8bn (£1.2bn; €1.8bn) secured by the fund this year was "nothing like enough, but it is a start."

The fund, which was set up in 2001, is widely expected to need \$8bn to \$10bn a year to meet the challenges of the three diseases.

Former US president Bill Clinton, speaking at the close of the conference, said that wealthy nations should "figure out and pay their share." He estimated that the United States owes the fund just under \$2bn.

Throughout the conference AIDS activists voiced criticisms of the US government and other governments for not committing more money to the fund.

US health secretary Tommy Thompson was shouted down at

the start of his address over his country's level of contribution. Backstage afterwards he told reporters that campaigners should vent their anger on the rest of the world.

The United States has contributed \$450m to the fund this year—25% of the total pledged. The United Kingdom gave \$200m, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation was the largest private contributor, pledging \$100m.

While the idea of the fund has been broadly welcomed, there is widespread doubt that it can secure the resources to live up to its expectations. Concerns have been expressed that some governments have put pressure on organisations not to apply to the fund.

The first pledges to the fund this year totalled \$1.6bn, to be spent over the next five years. Of this sum \$616m has been committed immediately, for 58 projects in 38 countries. More than 60% of the funding is for Africa and nearly 70% for projects



Campaigners in Barcelona last week demand help for developing countries to tackle AIDS

addressing HIV/AIDS. Importantly, prevention as well as treatment programmes are being funded.

Delegates were told that the grants would double the number of people in developing countries receiving antiretroviral drugs, including a sixfold increase in the current provision in Africa. But with just 30 000 people in Africa with access to antiretrovirals now, out of an estimated 28 million infected people, this increase is seen as a drop in the ocean.

The importance of treatment was echoed in the closing speech,

by former South African president Nelson Mandela.

"We must find ways and means to make life saving treatment available to all who need it, regardless of whether they can pay or where they live," he said. "Many people who suffer from HIV are not killed by the disease itself but by the stigma that surrounds it."

He added, "People must not be afraid of speaking out. When you keep quiet you are signing your own death warrant. The best thing to do is to be frank and say, 'I have this disease.'" □

South African government forced to give mothers antiretroviral drug

Pat Sidley *Johannesburg*

South Africa's Constitutional Court has ruled against the South African government in its fight with hundreds of state employed doctors and nurses and the Treatment Action Campaign over the provision of an antiretroviral drug to HIV positive pregnant women.

The government has resisted making nevirapine available to thousands of poor women reliant on public health facilities. The drug helps reduce the transmission of HIV to the unborn infant. It is also cheap and easily administered.

The court decided that the state's policy of providing a very limited number of women with the drug in 18 pilot sites was unconstitutional, as it failed to guarantee women their rights in terms of the constitu-

tion. Hospitals with adequate facilities will now have to give the drug to women who want it.

The fight has raged for close to a year in different courts, with the government losing at every stage—but fighting on. The government has contested that the drug's safety has not been proved, although it provided no evidence to back up its claim and maintained that the courts should have no role in the creation of health policy. The Constitutional Court ruling, which was unanimous, has shown clearly that the court will hold the government's policy up against the constitution and rule accordingly.

For AIDS activists this has been a huge victory—but the next major battle may be a little late for Zackie Achmat, the

most prominent leader in the Treatment Action Campaign. This battle will be for the provision of antiretroviral drugs to poor people with HIV/AIDS who cannot afford to buy the life prolonging drugs.

Battling with a drug resistant infection of the chest, Mr Achmat has AIDS and a low CD4 count and will not take antiretrovirals until the government shows that it will provide antiretroviral treatment to its citizens.

At present in South Africa the only people able to receive the drugs are those with access to private health care.

However, South Africa has an estimated five million people who are HIV positive—and most of them are poor.

Mr Achmat was not able to address a plenary session at last week's Barcelona AIDS conference in person because of his ill health, but he addressed the session through a video link, calling on drug companies to provide licences to generic

drug manufacturers so that poor people can have more access to cheaper drugs.

Several studies have shown that the government could begin to provide antiretroviral drugs to patients who most need it in hospitals that can provide the required monitoring and testing as well as the drugs.

The government has repeatedly refused to address the issue—largely, it seems, because of the lead given by President Thabo Mbeki's eccentric views on AIDS. He has several times expressed doubts about the link between HIV and AIDS.

Health minister Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang has for a second time been quoted as saying that nevirapine would "poison" South Africa's women—a view she has apparently repeated since the court finding.

Several government spokespeople have expressed the view that antiretroviral drugs are poisonous. □